

# Preface to *Hobbes politische Wissenschaft*

*Leo Strauss*

## 1.2 TRANSLATED BY DONALD J. MALETZ

The present study of Hobbes, which now appears for the first time in the German original, was composed in 1934–35 in England and published in 1936 as an English translation. Ernest Barker wrote a preface for the English edition and I added an introductory note, which may now be replaced by the following comments: The leading thought of my Hobbes book arose from positive and negative stimuli received while I still lived in Germany. The first time I heard about Hobbes in a way that caused me to take notice was in the lectures of Julius Ebbinghaus on the social teaching of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, given in Freiburg im Breisgau in the summer semester of 1922. Ebbinghaus appreciated in an unconventional way the originality of Hobbes; in his lively presentation, Hobbes' teaching became not merely plastic but vital. He was anything but a Hobbesian; if my memory does not deceive me, he already believed at that time that the significant part of Hobbes' teaching had been "sublated in" ["aufgehoben"] the Kantian philosophy. Carl Schmitt, in quite unconscious opposition to Ebbinghaus, asserted in his essay, "The Concept of the Political" ["Der Begriff des Politischen"] (*Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, 1927), that Hobbes is "by far the greatest and perhaps the only truly systematic political thinker." Schmitt's judgment about the greatness and the significance of Hobbes, a judgment which corresponded to my feelings or taste at that time, strengthened, understandably, my interest in Hobbes.

My study of Hobbes began in the context of an investigation of the origins of biblical criticism in the seventeenth century, namely, of Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise. The re-awakening of theology, which for me is marked by the names of Karl Barth and Franz Rosenzweig, appeared to make it necessary to investigate how far the critique of orthodox theology Jewish and Christian deserved to be victorious. Since then, the theological-political problem has remained the theme of my investigations. As far as the political, especially, is concerned, the contrast between Hobbes and Spinoza seemed to me at that time to be more important, more illuminating, than their agreement. In any case, I believed that I had learned, through my first study of Hobbes, that the prior accounts and aperçus had not done justice to what is decisive in him. When a fate that was in a certain way kind drove me to England and I gained in this way access to sources which cannot be studied elsewhere, I saw the opportunity not to limit my work to an analysis of the teaching of the mature Hobbes but to investigate at the same time how and from what source this teaching had been formed in Hobbes' mind. This double intention gave the present study its character. Philosophic interest in theology linked me with Gerhard Krüger; his review of my Spinoza book expressed my intention and result more clearly than I myself had done.<sup>1</sup> The final sentence of his Kant book,<sup>2</sup> which corresponded completely to my view at that time and with which I would still today, with certain reservations, agree, explains why I directed myself wholly to the "true politics"<sup>3</sup> and why I did not write about Hobbes as a Hobbesian. Insight into the necessity of understanding the dispute of the ancients and the moderns more thoroughly and more exactly than had previously been done, before one decided for the modern or the ultra-modern, linked me with Jacob Klein; his "Die griechische Logistik und die Entstehung der Algebra" (Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Mathematik, Astronomie und Physik, Band 3, Heft 1–2),<sup>4</sup> a masterly and exemplary investigation led by this insight, received the distinction of being passed over in near total silence in our everything-but-silent era.

As far as the defects of the present book are concerned, I have tacitly corrected them, so far as they have become known, in *Natural Right and History* (Chap. V, A) and in my critique of Polin's Hobbes Book (What is Political Philosophy?, pp. 170–96). Only in the latter publication (p. 176, note) did I succeed in laying bare the simple leading thought of Hobbes' teaching about man. For obscure reasons, Hobbes himself never did this; his famous clarity is limited to his conclusions, while his presuppositions

are shrouded in obscurity. His obscurity is, of course, not in every respect involuntary. What I stated 13 years ago in the Preface to the American edition of the present book, I will still allow to stand. I said then ... [The remaining three paragraphs of this preface are a German translation of the "Preface to the American Edition" of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).]

## NOTES

1. Krüger's review of Strauss' *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft: Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-politischen Traktat* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1930) is in the *Deutsche Literaturzeitung*, 1931, Heft 51 (December 20), p. 2407.
2. The last several paragraphs of Krüger's *Philosophie und Moral in der Kantischen Kritik* (Tübingen: Verlag J.C.B. Mohr, 1931) attempt to state the basis for a "philosophical, that is, unlimited questioning," in the light of the fact that, since Kant, "the *aporias* of the Enlightenment have become greater"; he argues that "Kant's problem is thoroughly contemporary," in that "The unpenetrated opposition of 'dogmatism' and 'skepticism' has become prominent in thought as in life itself with new sharpness, while the living and unifying *tradition*, upon which the Enlightenment fed, has disappeared and been replaced by the *historicism of knowledge*." The concluding sentences of the book may be translated as follows: "The question will only be in reality unlimited, if it *inquires into the good in the knowledge of the historical passion*. Let the *answer* to this question—and thus also the Christian answer of Augustine—be left undecided. That the decisive question remains true, even if it finds no answer, can be taught him who questions thus by the example of Socrates."
3. This term occurs in Kant's "Zum Ewigen Frieden," Anhang, I, end, in: Immanuel Kant, *Kleinere Schriften zur Geschichtsphilosophie Ethik und Politik*, ed. Karl Vorländer (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1964), p. 162. See the translation of "Perpetual Peace" in: Immanuel Kant, *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963), p. 128.
4. Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, trans. Eva Brann (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968).